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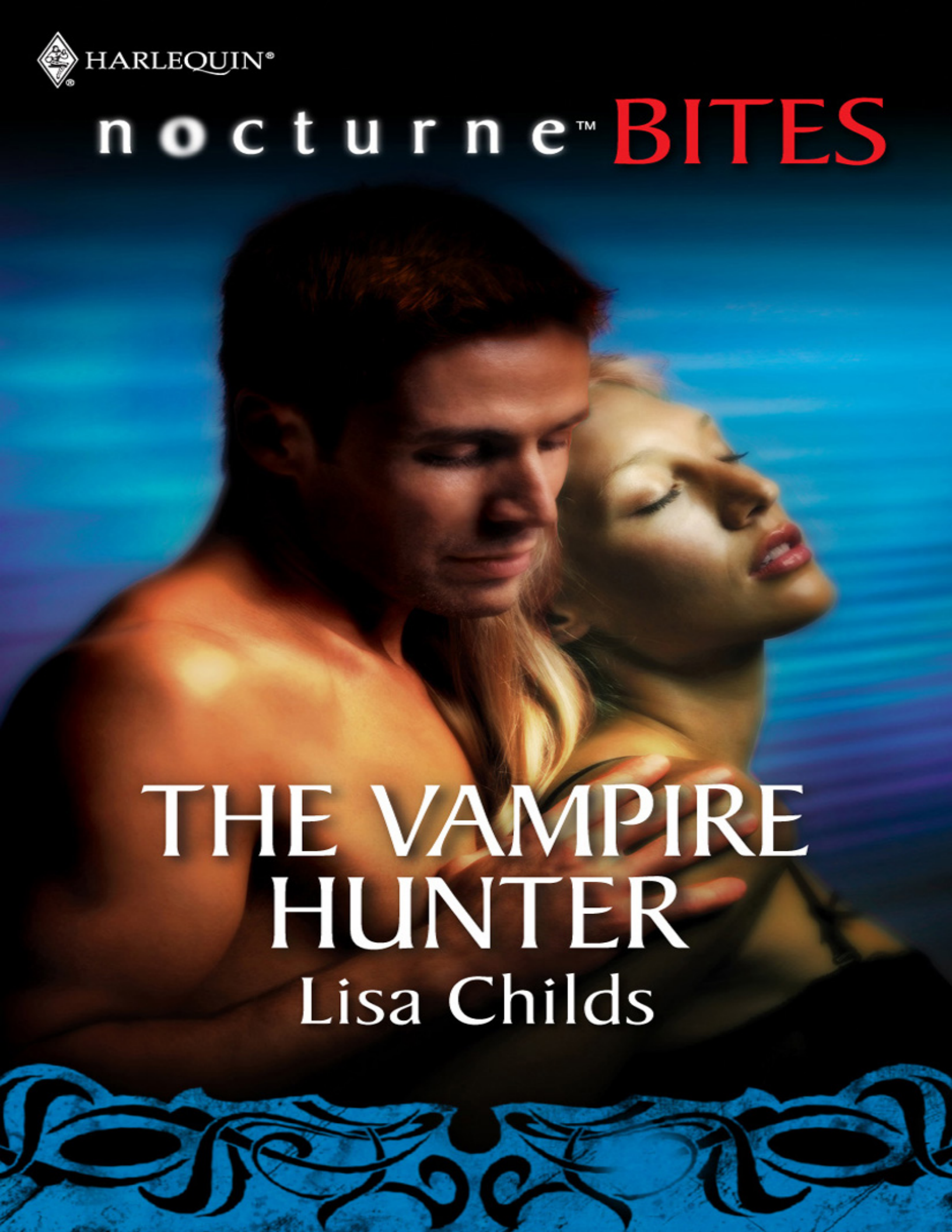

THE VAMPIRE HUNTER

Lisa Childs

The Vampire Hunter

The Secret Vampire Society Series

Lisa Childs

Hunter Liam McKiernan would do anything to lure vampire Jennifer Williams into his trap—even use her sister, Eve, against her. It was only fitting since he believed Jennifer killed his brother. But when he finally caught up with her, Jennifer was not the cold-hearted creature he expected. She was beautiful, warm…and lonely. Liam couldn't resist the urge to protect her—and the desire to make love to her.

But a member of the Secret Vampire Society *had* killed Liam's brother—a vampire who also wanted Jennifer himself….

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Chapter One

The splintered stake gouged her palm, drawing blood. Despite the pain, Jennifer Williams breathed a sigh of relief that her sister was gone now, whisked away in the arms of her lover. Professor Vossimer would protect Eve. It was Jennifer, standing alone in the alley with the man intent on murdering her, who had no one to protect her.

But herself…

She was all she needed, though. Jennifer wasn't the sickly girl she'd been twenty years ago; she was strong now. She was a vampiress.

Becoming a vampire had saved Jennifer from the cancer that had returned to claim her life. She hadn't become a vampire just to save herself, though. She'd done it to protect her sister from the invasive medical procedures their parents would have forced her to endure in order to help Jennifer. But once Jennifer had become a vampire, she'd joined the Secret Vampire Society and had had to obey their rules, which included never letting a human learn of their existence. To protect the society, no human was allowed to learn that vampires existed and live. So Eve had thought Jennifer dead for the past twenty years. She'd only come out of hiding now to protect her sister again. *From this man*.

Wrapping her fingers around the jagged piece of wood, she lifted it above her head. Then she stepped over the man lying on the asphalt at her feet. Before she could brandish the weapon at him, he swung the beam of his flashlight toward her. And her strength ebbed. This was no artificial light he trained on her face; it held the same UV rays of the sun. The sun that Jennifer hadn't seen since she'd been turned because it was the only thing, besides a stake through the heart, that could kill her.

And this man had brought both to the alley where he'd lured Jennifer. He had sent Eve after Professor Vossimer with the lie that the professor had killed Jennifer. His guest lecture on vampires being myths had been the last place she'd been seen. Professor Vossimer gave the lecture in order to protect the secret society, but he'd broken their main rule when he'd seen

how sick she'd been. By turning her into a vampire like himself, he had actually been the one to save her.

So Jennifer hadn't been able to stay in the shadows and let her sister blame the wrong person for her disappearance. But before she'd been able to explain, this man had showed up. First he'd threatened her sister and then he'd attacked the professor when the vampire had leaped to her defense. If Jennifer had had any doubt as to his intentions before, she had none now. He was a vampire hunter, and he was going to kill her.

Unless she fought back. Rallying the remnants of the strength he hadn't stolen from her yet, she kicked the flashlight from his bruised hand. The metal clattered across the asphalt, his beam swinging around the alley like an out-of-control spotlight. It glanced off the weathered brick walls of the buildings between which they stood. One of those buildings housed an underground club that vampires patronized. If she yelled loudly enough, she could summon someone to her aid. But Jennifer had stopped needing to be rescued when she'd stopped being human.

Fueled with fear and anger, she launched herself at the strange man, throwing her body on top of his while she swung the stake toward his face. He knocked the splintered wood from her hand, so she swung her fists instead. His features looked, and felt, as if they'd been chiseled from stone. While his auburn hair glowed like fire in the flashlight beam, his pale blue eyes chilled like ice. He caught her flailing fists, holding her wrists tight in his grasp. He'd already taken a beaten, had been nearly strangled by the hands of the professor who'd come to Eve's defense before Jennifer had. But still this man was strong. Superhumanly strong? Was he a vampire as well as a vampire hunter?

"Who are you?" she asked. "And what do you want with my sister?"

"I don't want your sister," he confirmed her suspicion, his voice as deep as gravel. His body was as hard as rock, too, every muscle rippling as he rolled her over, toward where the beam lit the asphalt. "I want you!"

She shivered at the intensity of his declaration. But she wasn't arrogant or foolish enough to think that he desired her. So she continued to fight. Tangling her legs with his long ones, she locked her arms around him and rolled them away from the light. "Why?"

"You shouldn't ask why," he advised, groaning as her arms tightened around his probably bruised ribs. His gaze focused on her lips, and he

pushed his hard thigh between her legs and rolled them across the asphalt again. “You should ask how.”

She gasped as his arms tightened around her, his heavily muscled chest pushing down against her breasts. Only able to whisper between pants for breath, she asked, “How do you want me?”

“Dead. I want you dead.”

Liam McKiernan wished like hell that was the only way he wanted her. But his body had begun to betray him, hardening at the closeness to her soft curves and erotic heat. He’d always thought she’d be as cold as her heart, but he’d been wrong. Jennifer Williams was warm and alive.

But because of her, his brother was not.

“Why?” she asked again. “Why do you hate me so much that you want me dead?”

He hadn’t expected her to recognize him. He’d only met her once, what seemed like a lifetime ago, and he looked nothing like his older half brother. “I want you the same way you left Bryan Truman.”

Her body tensed beneath his, and her green eyes warmed with affection. “Bryan. I haven’t seen Bryan in twenty years.”

“Not since the night you drained him of all his blood and left him for dead,” he said.

A cry of pain slipped through her lips. He studied her face, which had drained of all color. He could see her clearly now, as the darkness lightened with dawn’s approach.

“Bryan’s dead?” she asked, her full lower lip trembling slightly.

Damn. She was beautiful. It wasn’t just the golden blond hair and those mesmerizing green eyes; it was the vulnerability about her that drew a man to her, that made him want to protect her. While she was physically stronger now than the sickly girl he remembered from their meeting so long ago, her sensitivity belied an ethereal fragility. Those eyes shimmered with tears that softened him until he realized that it had to be an act. “Don’t pretend you don’t know.”

She shook her head. “He can’t be dead.” Her voice cracked with what seemed like genuine distress. “Not Bryan…”

“Did you think you could do that to him and he’d live? There’s no way a human could survive that. But then you might have forgotten…since you’re not human any longer.”

A breath shuddered out of those trembling lips. “I don’t know what you’re talking about….”

“Yeah, I know all about your damn secret society of vampires.” And he wasn’t dead even though he’d been warned any human who learned of its existence would be killed.

“I wasn’t talking about the society,” she murmured, her voice growing fainter as the sky lightened. “Bryan…” Tears shimmered in her eyes. “He can’t be dead….”

“How could you not know that he died?” Liam asked. Even though two decades had passed since his brother’s death, Liam still missed him. With only three years separating the half brothers, they’d been more like friends than siblings—even though they’d lived in separate homes.

“I—I had to give up everything from my old life,” she explained. “My family. My friends. I couldn’t go back. I couldn’t keep in touch with them.”

Bitterness overwhelming him, he released it in a short chuckle. “But yet you’re here for your sister.”

“I haven’t been there for my sister,” she said, guilt dimming the brightness of her eyes. “I haven’t seen her in twenty years…until tonight, until you put her in danger to draw me out. Why?”

“You know why.” Or at least he had been convinced she would know, but her confusion and surprise over his brother’s death seemed genuine. “For Bryan…”

“Bryan wouldn’t want you to hurt me,” she pointed out. Correctly.

“You’re doing this for yourself,” she said. “For revenge for something I didn’t do—for something I never could have done. I couldn’t have hurt Bryan. He was my friend.” Her voice cracked again with undeniable pain. “My best friend…”

Liam’s head pounded, maybe from the fight with the professor. The vampire had nearly strangled the life from Liam. If not for this woman’s interference, the professor probably would have killed Liam. Despite his boot-camp training and sixteen-year career in the marines, Liam hadn’t been able to match the monster’s strength. While he’d made a point of learning everything about the secret society, he wasn’t one of them. He was a vampire hunter, but the only vampire he’d ever sought to kill was *her*.

Maybe his head also pounded because of the doubt now plaguing him. What if she spoke the truth? What if she knew nothing about Bryan’s murder?

Her body went limp beneath his, her face paling as the sky grew lighter. He could kill her easily now. He wouldn't even need the special weapon he'd made to fire the stake into her heart. He could impale her chest with his bare hands. Then he would finally have the revenge that had driven his life for the past twenty years.

Unless she was innocent…

Then he would become the cold-blooded killer he'd thought he had been hunting for two decades. He would be just as much a monster as a member of the Secret Vampire Society.

Chapter Two

Strong arms encircled Jennifer as the man carried her down the dimly lit, underground corridor. She hadn't been carried since she'd been a child. Hadn't been loved or protected in so many years. Since she'd become a vampiress, someone had been interested in her – so interested that he'd actually made her feel unsafe, and she'd been hiding from him as much as she'd been hiding from her sister. That man didn't love her, though.

This man didn't love her, either. And he certainly didn't intend to protect her. Liam McKiernan intended to kill her for what he thought she'd done.

"Why didn't you just leave me for dead?" she asked, her voice raspy as her strength slowly ebbed back. "Or wouldn't that have been good enough for you? You want the satisfaction of killing me yourself."

"Is this it?" he asked, his pale eyes squinting as he peered through the shadows.

She glanced toward the door, in front of where he'd stopped, and nodded. "It's my apartment." And she had no idea why she'd let him bring her here except that she hadn't been thinking when he'd asked where she lived. Jennifer had barely been conscious. The rising sun had weakened her physically and the news of Bryan's death had weakened her emotionally.

Poor Bryan…

How could this man think that she would have murdered her best friend? She struggled against his grasp, trying to slide down his body. But he held her tight.

"Where's your key?"

"Above the door." What did it matter now if he knew where she lived or where she hid her key? The only way she would be able to stop him from killing her would be if she killed him first.

He clasped her against him with one arm, her face buried in his throat, as he fumbled above the trim. To kill him, all she had to do was bare her fangs and sink them deep in his throat. She'd never done it before, had

never drank from another being—she'd only drank the processed blood the society supplied at places like Club Underground. But she was tempted to bite now, her fangs distending inside her mouth.

He smelled of musk and male sweat from his earlier physical struggles. Hunger clutched at her, tightening the muscles in her stomach, as the urge to taste him overwhelmed her. Just as he jammed the key into the lock and threw open her apartment door, she slid her tongue down the side of his neck.

He shuddered and finally released her, kicking the door shut behind them. "What the hell are you doing?" he asked, his voice rough while his pale eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Do you think you're going to kill me like you killed my brother?"

"Bryan's your brother?"

"Was," he brutally reminded her of the death of her best friend.

Regret and grief overwhelmed her now. She backed away from him, through the brick archway that led from the foyer into the living room. He followed her then gasped, staring at the artwork propped against, and hanging from, all of the weathered brick walls. He circled the room before stopping in front of the portrait of his brother.

She'd painted Bryan as a teenager, the sun shining on his bright smile while the wind ruffled his brown hair. His eyes were wide with innocence and warmth. He couldn't be dead. Not Bryan…

"You must be Liam," she said. But she saw nothing of the freckle-faced redhead in the auburn-haired stranger she'd struggled with in the alley. The kid was in one of the portraits, too. Although they'd only met once, she'd remembered the mischievous boy Bryan had loved so much. She had painted Liam in a tree with his older brother standing beneath him, ready to catch him if he fell.

Liam reached out and ran his fingertip over the ridge of the thick oil paint. "You did these?"

She nodded then realized he had yet to pull his gaze from the painting, so she replied, "Yes."

He moved along the wall to another portrait. "Is this you?"

Her breath caught as she stared at the blond-haired girl lying in a hospital bed, tubes and machines hooked to her fragile body. "No. It's Eve."

"Bryan said you were the one who was sick," he said, "who had cancer."

“Yes, and I would have died had my parents not had Eve, not used her to save me.” That was why she’d painted that picture, to remind herself what her sister had gone through for her, what she would have gone through again had Jennifer stayed human. Their parents would have used her again, whatever the risk, to save Jennifer. Guilt was as heavy as the paint on the canvas.

Then, remembering what he had done to Eve, anger coursed through her. “You used my sister to get to me!”

“I didn’t hurt her,” he said, his gaze finally locking with hers again, his pale eyes so cold and hard.

“I didn’t hurt Bryan.” She gestured at the portraits she had done to remind herself of her best friend. “I couldn’t have…”

“If not you,” he said, as if challenging her to change his mind about her guilt, “who would have done *that* to him?”

That—drained him of his blood. She remembered the vivid, horrifying picture Liam had painted inside her head. “He must have tried to find me, must have learned about the secret society. They don’t allow any human to learn about the society and live.”

“I’m alive,” he pointed out with that short, bitter chuckle that had her skin tingling in reaction.

What was it about the man that drew her when she should have hated him as much as he hated her? “You must not have told anyone.”

“Just Eve.”

“You might not have physically hurt her, but you put her in grave danger,” she said, fear pumping through her veins along with the rage. “You put her life at risk from them.”

“Them. They,” he repeated. “Don’t you consider yourself one of them?”

She shivered. While she lived among the secret society, she wasn’t entirely comfortable in their underground world – especially since one had taken that uncomfortable interest in her. But for a few friends, she kept to herself—moving from city to city, taking art classes or teaching them. At night. Always at night. But after all the years she’d spent in hospitals and her own bed, she’d grown used to going without sunshine. Eve and Bryan were all that she’d missed.

“Sometimes I don’t know what I am,” she admitted, surprised she would confess so much to a stranger. “But I know what I’m not.” She stepped closer to him, so that only mere inches separated his heavily

muscled chest from her breasts. Staring up into his handsome face, she stated unequivocally, “I am not a killer.”

But was he?

Liam wished she was lying. Then he wouldn’t feel so bad about what he’d done, about how he had used her sister to further his own agenda. He hadn’t thought about the danger he’d put Eve in; he’d thought only about vengeance. And if Jennifer was lying, he could have that now. He could pull another stake from the pocket of his long jacket, jam it into the gun he’d designed and fire it into Jennifer Williams’s cold heart.

But her heart wasn’t cold. Even if he hadn’t felt her physical warmth when he’d wrestled with her and then carried her home, he would have been able to see her emotional heart. She’d put it into every one of her paintings, especially those of her little sister and those of his brother.

He turned back to the portrait of Bryan’s grinning face. Unlike some of the newer canvases, which were propped against the walls, the one of Bryan hung in the place of honor over the mantel of the old Chicago-brick fireplace. “You loved him.”

“Yes.”

Liam hadn’t needed her heartfelt confirmation. Her love for his brother was in every stroke of her brush across the canvas. Having felt about Bryan as she had, there was no way she could have hurt him. She never could have done to him the brutality that had been done. She’d loved Bryan too much.

Liam’s gut clenched, almost as if he were jealous. Of her feelings for Bryan? He’d always thought he’d been jealous of her, that no matter how much his brother had loved him, he would have rather hung out with Jennifer Williams. When Liam turned back to her, and lost himself in those mesmerizing deep green eyes, he understood why. She wasn’t just beautiful outside; she was beautiful inside, too. “He loved you, too.”

Tears trembled on her thick black lashes. “He was my best friend since kindergarten. When I got sick, other kids didn’t want anything to do with me. They seemed scared that they might catch cancer. Bryan wasn’t afraid of anything. He was fearless. And his friendship made me feel fearless.”

“His fearlessness is probably what led to his death.” When Jennifer had disappeared, Bryan had been determined to find her—with no thought to his own safety.

“You don’t blame me anymore?” she asked.

“I don’t think you killed him.” He’d had doubts in the alley—enough to spare her life then. But seeing the portraits had cemented those doubts and completely changed his mind. She couldn’t have killed someone she’d cared about so much. “But I still blame you.”

She flinched as if he’d slapped her.

“It’s your fault for taking off like you did. If he hadn’t been looking for you, he wouldn’t have found whoever killed him.” So that anger he’d felt for her, while it didn’t entirely consume him as it once had, it still gnawed at him.

“I didn’t think he’d look for me. I thought he’d assume what everyone else had—that I was dead.”

“He said he would have felt it—if you were dead,” he said, explaining his brother’s romanticism. “You were so close that he was convinced that he would have known if you were really gone.”

A tear spilled from her eye and streaked down her cheek. “Oh, Bryan…”

“How come you didn’t just know like that, that he was dead? Didn’t you love him like he loved you?” She’d painted her feelings for him, but her love looked more like deep affection. His brother’s love had bordered on obsession. At sixteen Liam hadn’t understood that kind of love—the kind that lasted longer than a week. Hell, at thirty-six he didn’t understand. He had never loved anyone like that—maybe because he’d spent so much of his life obsessed with this woman. Not out of love but out of hate and his insatiable need for revenge.

“I loved Bryan like a friend,” she said. “Just a friend…”

But his brother had wanted more, had believed that eventually she would have developed the same feelings for him that he’d had for her. If only he could find her…

“He wanted more than friendship.”

She shook her head in denial of his claim. But how could she not have known when she’d painted that love in his brother’s eyes?

“That was why he never stopped looking for you,” he continued, “until he was murdered.”

She shook her head again, with another denial and with pride. “No one I know would have harmed Bryan.”

“It had to have been the professor who killed him,” Liam reflected. “Bryan would have tracked him down first, like I had. The professor’s

lecture on vampires being a myth was the last place you were seen twenty years ago. It had to have been the professor." Liam should have killed the vampire while he'd had the chance. Even though he'd fired his makeshift weapon, he hadn't had it pressed tight against the professor's chest. He hadn't quite been able to bring himself to kill.

Again. He'd killed before, in the line of duty, as a marine. Not as a vampire hunter. He'd only become a hunter to kill one vampire. Jennifer Williams.

"Professor Vossimer would never hurt anyone," Jennifer insisted, "least of all a sweet boy like Bryan."

"You hope that's true because you trusted the man to protect your sister, and you might have put her in danger instead." She'd urged Eve to leave with the professor and had confronted Liam alone in that dark alley. She was brave as well as beautiful.

"You put her in danger by sending her after him—after me!" Her anger returned, brightening her eyes and flushing her pale skin. She closed the distance between them and stabbed her finger in his chest. "How could you do that—"

"The same way I can do this," he said as he wrapped his arms around her and lowered his head. He pressed his mouth to hers, and the passion that had simmered between them now sizzled. Heat fused their lips together in an intense kiss of possession and anger and undeniable desire. Her breasts molded to his chest, her heart pounding in the same crazy, rampant rhythm his did.

Her lips parted on a moan, and he slid his tongue inside her mouth and over her tongue. But then a sharp fang scraped it and he pulled back, as he remembered who and what she was. He dropped his arms from around her and stepped back to separate their bodies.

"Why'd you do that?" she asked, between pants for breath.

Stop or start? He knew why he'd stopped but not why he'd started. Except that she was so beautiful and she'd looked so vulnerable…

"Why'd you kiss me?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said, afraid that he'd lost his mind. "Why'd you lick my neck earlier?"

"I wanted to taste you…."

As he had earlier, when her tongue had left a damp trail on his skin, he shuddered. He believed she hadn't killed Bryan. But that didn't mean that

she wasn’t capable. After all, she was a vampire.

Would she stop at just the taste—or would she take all of his blood as someone had his brother’s?

Chapter Three

The heat she'd felt earlier now rushed to Jennifer's face. And she wished she could take back her idiotic admission. She had wanted a taste of him, though.

After his crazy passionate kiss, she wanted more than a taste. She wanted all of him…buried deep inside her. "You're not in any danger with me," she assured him. "I didn't mean that like it sounded."

"You don't want to bite my neck?"

Just his asking the question had her fangs lengthening more, but she closed her lips over them and shook her head. "I don't…do that…."

"You really are in denial."

"Denial?" Did he know that she lied? That she hadn't been satisfied with just a lick of his salty-sweet skin?

"You're in denial of what you are," he clarified. "Why did you become one of them if you didn't want to live that life?"

"Because I wanted to live."

"The cancer had come back?"

The old fear rushed over her, choking her, so she could only nod.

"You fought it before."

"At my sister's expense. I wanted to live but I didn't want to risk her life," she explained. "I didn't want my parents and doctors putting her through any more painful procedures."

He turned toward the portrait of Eve in the hospital bed, and his icy eyes warmed some with sudden understanding. "You did it for her."

"And for me," she insisted. She hadn't acted selflessly. "I wanted to live."

"Are you?"

"Of course. I'm alive."

"But are you living? Or are you hiding out down here, from the sun—from the rest of the society, painting your portraits of the life you left behind?"

She flinched at the accuracy of his assessment.

"And how do you live…if you don't drink blood?"

"You don't drink your milk straight from the cow, do you?" she asked.

He chuckled, that gruff chuckle that had her pulse tripping wildly. "So you want to taste me but you don't actually want to bite me?" he asked.

She swallowed a moan as temptation overwhelmed her. "I don't have to bite you to taste you." Maybe it was because he'd taunted her about hiding out that she was emboldened enough to touch him. She stroked her fingers over his fly before reaching for the tab of his strained zipper. The metal teeth sighed as she lowered it. Then she unsnapped his jeans and freed his erection from the flap of his cotton boxers.

"Jennifer…" He groaned her name as she leaned over and closed her lips around him.

Flicking her tongue across the smooth tip of him, she teased a bead of desire from him before she sucked him deeper in her throat. Her fangs scraped down the sides of his shaft, and he jerked in reaction.

Then he clutched his hands in her hair and pulled her mouth away. "No…"

"I wasn't going to hurt you," she promised.

"But I'm hurting. And I'm going to make you hurt, too," he said as he covered her mouth with his and started stroking his tongue between her lips

His hands smoothed over her sweater, cupping her breasts through the thin cashmere. She arched and pressed into his palms, wanting more.

He pulled back from the kiss to drag the sweater over her head and drop it onto the paint-spattered hardwood floor. She wore only a thin lace bra beneath, but he unclasped that and it, too, dropped on to the floor. His hands shook slightly as he fumbled with the clasp and zipper of her pants. Then they fell down, leaving her standing before him wearing only a thin strip of lace.

He groaned again—even though she hadn't touched him. And he stared, his gaze skimming over every exposed inch of her. "You are so damn beautiful…."

He said it like it was a bad thing, like he resented her for her beauty. Like he blamed her for it.

Before she could take offense and come to her senses, he was touching her again. His fingers skimmed over every inch of her now, stroking her skin into goose bumps of awareness. Heat streaked through her, so that her

nipples peaked and her blood pounded hot and heavy through her veins. Then his lips replaced his fingers, kissing and suckling.

He pulled the tip of a breast into his mouth and teased the sensitive nipple until she cried out at the sensation. “I’m hurting,” she said, as an unbearable pressure built in her womb. “Please…”

He tore the skimpy lace free of her hips. Then his fingers stroked through her curls, teasing the nub of her femininity before easing inside her. She arched into his hand, seeking release from that excruciating pressure. He lowered his head to her breasts again, tugging at a nipple. Heat streaked through her, and she moaned as some of the pressure eased. But even as it eased, he built it again…with his touch. Before he could release her tension, he pulled back. He shucked his long coat and his shirt, dropping them atop her clothes. Then he stepped out of his pants and pushed down his boxers.

Her breath caught at the size of him. He was so big. So aroused, his engorged flesh throbbing. “Where?” he asked. “Where’s your bedroom?”

Confident he would follow her, she led him down the short hall to her room and flicked on the lights. Wall sconces illuminated tiny circles on the brocade wallpaper and cast a gold glow onto her soft silk sheets. She kept walking, straight to the bed, dropping onto the mattress before turning back to him. He dropped the clothes he’d gathered upon the floor and followed her down onto those silk sheets, covering her body with his.

He was all satin skin, stretched taut over hard muscle. She wanted to taste every inch of him. But she could only wrap her arms around his back before he thrust inside her. She arched, trying to take him deep, but her unused muscles screamed in protest. And the scream slipped free of her lips.

He tensed, perspiration breaking out on his forehead. “Damn. You’re—” He pulled out and stood up. “You’re—”

“Not anymore,” she pointed out, her body aching from the possession of his. The pain receded, leaving the frustration of the pleasure that eluded her.

“Damn.” He groaned. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not,” she said, and she held out her arms for him to join her again. “Don’t stop.”

Dilated pupils darkened his pale blue eyes, and he shook his head. “I can’t stop now.”

But instead of covering her body with his again, he leaned over her. First he kissed her lips in a long, gentle kiss. Then he moved his mouth

down her body, over her breasts and down her stomach. He parted her legs, and his mouth soothed the pain his body had inflicted on her.

She clutched at the sheets, fisting them in her hands, and cried out—this time in pleasure as the tension broke and she came. She had never felt anything as intense—not even when she'd changed from human to vampiress.

But before she descended from the ecstasy, he was there again. His body covered hers, and he eased inside her, gently this time. He didn't thrust hard or deep enough. So she lifted her legs and wrapped them around his lean waist, then arched her hips, too. She took him deeper.

"Okay?" he asked, his voice rough with desire.

She nodded. "More than okay…" she murmured, the pressure building again.

He thrust harder. Deeper.

She reached her arms around his broad shoulders, holding on, meeting each of those thrusts. Panting for breath, she buried her face in his throat. As he strained, the cords in his neck distended, and his skin brushed against her lips and her fangs, tempting her to bite….

Liam was tempted. To just let her bite him. But could she stop with just that taste she wanted? He hadn't been able to stop with just a kiss. He wanted more. Even when he'd discovered that she'd never made love before, he hadn't been able to stop.

And now, with her muscles clutching him tight, holding him deep inside her heat, he couldn't stop…unless she killed him. So he was tempted to just let her bite him….

Her lips brushed his throat, along with the sharp point of her fangs. Then she threw back her head and screamed, as she came again. Wet heat poured over him, and he thrust hard. Deep. And his world exploded with pleasure so intense he screamed…her name.

His hands shaking in reaction, he pushed her damp hair back from her flushed face. "You okay?" he asked again. "I didn't hurt you?"

"No, that was…"

"Worth waiting for?" he asked, still stunned that she had been a virgin and that he found her innocence both a gift and a burden. He'd given her pleasure, but would she expect more? Would she expect a commitment?

Her eyes bright, she nodded.

“Why did you?” he asked, slowly withdrawing from her. He groaned as her muscles clutched him yet. Then he flopped onto his back beside her. Wrapping his arm around her shoulders, he rolled her onto his chest. “Why did you wait?”

“First I was sick,” she said. “Too sick to worry about it. To want it. And then I was…” Her breath shuddered out, warm against his skin. “Then I didn’t know what I was.”

“That makes two of us.”

“You didn’t know what I was or what you are?” she asked, her eyes bright with curiosity.

“You. I thought you were a killer.”

She pressed a kiss against his chest. “You were wrong.”

He tangled his fingers in her golden hair, and his breath shuddered out with deep relief. “I’m glad.”

For twenty years he’d hated her, had lived for the day he would track her down and exact his revenge. He should have been disappointed, devastated even. And he was that Bryan’s killer was still out there. But it wasn’t the woman his brother had loved. The woman that Liam worried he could love, too.

Was it true that hatred was just the other side of love?

“What about you?” she asked. “What are you?”

“I’m not a killer. But I have killed—in the line of duty.”

“You’re a police officer?”

“Marine,” he said with pride. In the corps he’d found the brotherhood he’d missed since Bryan’s murder.

“You’re not a…”

“A…?”

“Vampire.”

He let out a short chuckle. “Why would you think that?”

“Because you know so much about the Secret Vampire Society.”

“And I’m still alive?”

“How did you learn so much…unless you’re one of us?” she questioned him.

“My specialty is intelligence ops. I have ways of finding out information that nobody else can.” Neither the methods he’d employed nor the information he’d learned had allowed him to sleep easy at night.

“You’re not going to stop, are you?”

“My job?” he asked. “I retired early.” As much as he’d loved being a marine and serving his country, it had been time for him to quit. Before he’d entirely his soul. Hell, it wasn’t his job that would have cost him his soul; it was his overwhelming need to avenge his brother’s death.

“You retired early to become a vampire hunter,” she deduced. Correctly.

“I only ever intended to hunt down one vampire.”

“Me.”

He shook his head. “The one who killed my brother.”

“And you’re not going to stop until you find him or her.”

“You want me to?” he asked, nearly as stunned as he’d been at finding her untouched. “You want me to let Bryan’s killer go unpunished? I thought you loved him, too.”

“I do.” She sighed and amended, “I did.” She hadn’t had twenty years to get used to Bryan being gone. “I also knew him really well, and I know that he wouldn’t want you risking your life to avenge his death.”

Liam pulled his hands from her hair and sucked in a breath as guilt pressed more heavily on his chest than her slight weight. “I wonder what he would have felt about this—about what we did.”

Would Bryan feel that his brother had betrayed him?

“Bryan would want you to move on. He would want you to be happy.”

For the first time in years, a genuine smile tugged at Liam’s mouth. “He would.” And that was why he missed his brother so damn much. “And that’s why I can’t do it—not until I learn who killed him.”

“And kill that person.”

“Bryan deserves justice.”

“What about you? What do you deserve?”

Her? The woman his brother had loved so obsessively that he’d died looking for her? Liam didn’t deserve the life that should have been Bryan’s. “I have to do this.”

“Not now,” she said. “Stay here…with me…for just a little while longer….”

“What about your sister?” he asked. He had used Eve, but he hadn’t wanted any harm to come to her. “Don’t you want to check on her?”

“I believe she’s safe with the professor,” she insisted. “He’s not a killer. He’s not the one who hurt Bryan.”

“But can you think of any member of the society who would have killed him?”

She shook her head and yawned. “I’ll think about it….” she murmured sleepily.

He’d kept her out after sunrise; he’d risked her life and sapped her strength then he’d made love to her. He could let her sleep now. He even found himself drifting off, his eyes closing as consciousness slipped away from him.

But he had been a soldier too long to sleep too deeply. So he awoke the minute he heard the noise, the faint scratching at the front door as someone jimmied the lock. Then the hinges whispered as the door opened. A floorboard creaked in the living room. Another creaked in the hall. Then there was the faint shift of air of someone else breathing as the intruder entered the bedroom.

Someone had gone to a great deal of effort to break into Jennifer’s home. It could have been the professor or even her sister, coming to check on her. But Liam’s instincts, the ones that had kept him alive during several deployments, warned him otherwise. Whoever had broken into the apartment didn’t intend to protect anyone; he intended to kill.

Maybe Liam wouldn’t have to look any further for Bryan’s killer. Maybe the murderer had found him.

Chapter Four

The quickening of his heartbeat beneath her cheek awoke Jennifer. Something was wrong. Bad dream? A while ago, he had drifted off to sleep, his breathing deep and even like hers as she'd slept in his arms. "What's the —"

His hand covered her mouth. Then he wrapped an arm around her and rolled her off the side of the bed. While it was only a couple of feet to the floor, she landed hard, her elbow, hip and thigh striking the cold wood. "What the hell—"

Then all hell broke loose. Something, dressed all in black, separated from the shadows and flew at the bed. Curses and grunts filled the air, as blows connected. Liam fought, his sculpted muscles rippling beneath naked skin. But even as a soldier, he was no match for the vampire who attacked him.

Jennifer sprang to her feet. "Stop! Stop it!" she pleaded. She climbed onto the bed, grabbing at hands, trying to stop the blows. But a flailing fist struck her cheek, knocking her back onto the floor. From the force of the blow, it had to have been the vampire who'd hit her. It wasn't the professor coming to her aid; this vampire was attacking, not defending. Her breath escaped in a gasp of pain and shock; she struggled to regain it and struggled to regain the strength to help Liam.

But she was too late.

She saw fangs bared, glittering in the darkness like the dark, soulless eyes of the vampire.

"No! Look out!" She screamed a warning to Liam, but she drew the attention of his attacker instead.

The vampire, who had ghostly pale skin and hair with those flat black eyes, turned toward her. She shuddered in recognition and revulsion. Roger Milliken. If not for the threat to her lover, she would have grabbed up her clothes or the sheet. Anything to cover herself.

But while she distracted Roger, Liam reached down beside the bed to where he'd dropped his clothes. "Leave her alone!" he shouted. And when the vampire whirled back toward him, Liam plunged a stake into the heart of the intruder.

With an animalistic shriek, the vampire flew back. Roger's lanky body struck the wall and slid down to the floor, blood smearing the ivory brocade wallpaper.

"You son of a bitch!" Liam yelled. "Stay down. Die!" He jumped out of the bed and rushed forward, but the vampire surged to his feet.

Jennifer jumped, too, in front of Liam to protect him. No matter how much he'd studied the secret society, he had no idea of the danger he faced. But instead of fighting her, Roger—his dark eyes glowing eerily from his pale face—turned away from her. Then, with another shriek, he flew out of the bedroom and out of the apartment.

Her breath shuddered out not only with relief, but also with apprehension. Just because the intruder had left for now didn't mean he wouldn't come back. Having recognized him, Jennifer realized now that Roger had never left her alone. Since her transformation, he had always been around; he had always been watching her no matter how hard she'd tried to hide from him.

Revulsion lifted goose bumps on her bare skin. She'd always been uncomfortable around him. She'd never had any doubt that he wanted more than friendship from her.

"Don't let him get away!" Strong hands closed over her shoulders, and Liam tried moving her aside.

But she planted her feet and tensed her body, refusing to budge. "You can't chase after him!" Because as much as Liam might want to kill him, Roger Milliken probably wanted to kill Liam more out of jealousy. She'd rejected Roger for years, but she'd given herself freely to Liam.

Heat flushed her face at how easily she'd succumbed to desire. But she'd never felt as intense a connection before in her life—not even to Bryan. Maybe it was because they shared Bryan—loving him, missing him—that they had that connection, though.

"I have to get him!" Liam replied, his voice rough with desperation. "I have to make sure he's dead!" His hands grasped her shoulders harder, although not painfully so, and Liam shoved harder.

But Jennifer didn’t even sway. Underground and out of the sun, she’d regained her strength. Whirling around, she planted her hands on his muscular chest, which heaved with pants for breath. Blood streaked his skin. She gasped, concern gripping her. “You’re hurt! Are you all right?”

“Hell, no!” he yelled, his handsome face flushing with anger. “He’s getting away! You’re letting my brother’s killer get away.”

“He could have killed you, too. Are you hurt?” she asked, running her palms over his chest. The blood smeared but revealed no wounds.

He shook his head. “I’m not hurt. I’m pissed.”

He was bruised, but his skin wasn’t broken. He had no scratch or puncture wound. The blood wasn’t his. She sighed again with relief only, and she continued to stroke her fingers over his chest and shoulders.

He caught her wrists in his hands. Although she was strong now, so was he. His grasp was so tight; it was just short of painful. “That was really him, then? That was my brother’s killer?”

Her throat filling with emotion, she could only nod. Her realization was too awful to voice. As Liam had said, it was still her fault that Bryan had died.

“You knew all along who killed him?” He released her, dropping her wrists almost as if he were repulsed by her touch.

“No,” she assured him. “I couldn’t think of anyone who would hurt Bryan.” Because she never thought of Roger—without a shudder of unease—so she always made a point to put him far out of her mind. And she’d tried to put him far behind her. But he always found her, just as he had tonight. “Until now…”

“So you do know who he is?”

“Roger Milliken. He’s the one who told me about the secret society,” she admitted. “He attended Professor Vossimer’s lecture the same night I did.”

“Isn’t it breaking the rules to tell?”

“Yes. But he knew I was sick.” She swallowed hard, choking on her own fear. “He knew I was dying anyway….”

“He wanted to turn you?”

“Yes.” And the reasons he’d given her had convinced her that it was her only option…to live. But the reasons he’d left unsaid, that had glittered in his eerily flat black eyes, had made her uneasy. “But I didn’t want to give him the wrong idea. I didn’t want to be indebted to him.”

Or tied to Roger for eternity. She'd known the professor wouldn't hold her to that society rule, that the human had to vow to stay forever with the vampire who turned her. In fact many members of the society had abandoned that rule over the past few years; with no thought to a relationship, they'd turned humans who learned the secret. They'd preferred it to killing them.

"You knew he was dangerous?"

"I didn't think he was dangerous. I just didn't trust that he only wanted friendship from me." She resisted the urge to shudder again at the thought of being with Roger, like she'd been with Liam. She'd never suspected she could be with anyone the way she'd been with Liam, though. Passionate. Adventurous. Then she remembered the adventure they'd just shared. "I never thought he could hurt someone…until tonight…." Until he had broken into her apartment and attacked her lover.

"He won't ever hurt anyone again," he promised, trying again to move her aside.

But she clutched at him, holding him back. Keeping him with her and safe. "You can't fight him and win," she cautioned. "He's too powerful for a human."

Liam uttered the bitter chuckle that she'd actually begun to grow fond of. "He's not too powerful for me. I shoved a stake in his heart." He laughed again and stepped back. "It's over. He's dead."

"It's over," she repeated, as she realized he'd brought that stake to her bed. To protect himself from her? Or kill her? Until Roger had attacked him, he had probably still held her responsible for Bryan's death. She ached inside at the loss of what could have been between them, if he would have let himself care about her. For too many years, she'd been so alone. So isolated. She hadn't died, but she hadn't been living, either. Until tonight. But whatever she'd begun to feel for him—she couldn't identify what she'd never before experienced—he had killed like he believed he'd killed the intruder.

Instead of rejoicing over his long-sought revenge, Liam tensed with foreboding. He didn't regret the kill; it hadn't been an act of vigilante justice. He'd acted in self-defense—and to protect Jennifer.

But right now she seemed as determined to protect herself as she had when she'd first encountered him in the alley. She wrapped her arms tightly

around herself as she had her robe, closing herself off from him. Were they, and the passion they'd shared, what she had just pronounced over?

As his gut knotted, he worried that their intimacy was over. And that troubled him. Tonight, and their making love, had been a moment of weakness. Not something he'd ever planned or would ever consider repeating. Making love with her had betrayed Bryan. He shouldn't have been able to experience what his brother had been denied. Because of the killer…

"It's over," he reminded himself. If only avenging Bryan's murder could absolve him of *his* guilt.

She shook her head, her blond hair tangling around the shoulders of her pink robe. "Roger may not be dead."

His guilt turned to anger and unease. Despite the stake Liam had plunged into the vampire's heart, Roger had had the strength to fly from the apartment. Had Liam missed? "No," he answered his own doubts. "I know that I got the stake in…"

Deep enough to do the damage required to end the life of an immortal monster? The doubts nagged, knotting his stomach muscles.

"If you'd done that in any other city, it might have been enough. But here in Zantrax the society has a special surgeon." Her eyes brightened with awe. "A brilliant surgeon. He knows how to reverse the damage of a stake through the heart. He can cure what used to be incurable."

"No." He shook his head. "That's not possible."

"I guess your intel on the society wasn't as thorough as you'd thought."

Tension gripped him harder and not just over the possibility that Bryan's killer would survive his injury, but because of her tone. She wasn't just closed off; she was pissed off.

"Are you mad?" he asked. "Would you rather that I hadn't hurt him?"

"How could you even ask me that?" she asked, her voice cracking as she took obvious offense. "You think that I would rather he had hurt you?" Tears dampened her eyes, but she laughed, echoing his bitterness. "You will never trust me."

"I spent years thinking you'd killed my brother," Liam reminded her. "It's not easy to put aside all that anger and suspicion."

She nodded and sent one of the tears over the rim of her lower lid; it streaked down her cheek. "You still hate me."

“No,” he assured her. If only he did, he wouldn’t have betrayed his brother.

“But you blame me for his death.”

“I shouldn’t have done that, either,” he admitted. It wasn’t her fault that she was so damned beautiful that his brother had loved her too much to let her go.

“Why not?” she asked. “You were actually right about that. It is my fault. I should have known that Bryan would look for me. He was always such a good friend.”

“He wanted to be more than your friend.”

“You said that earlier, but I didn’t believe you then and I don’t believe you now. He never told me that. Never showed me. He was only ever my friend.” Her throat moved as she swallowed down emotion. “But Roger wasn’t. I should have known that he might be dangerous—should have known that Bryan might be in danger. It was my fault. He was my friend, and I failed him.” The tears fell harder now as she wept for the loss Liam had solely borne.

Their father hadn’t had much to do with Bryan before he died, so he hadn’t missed him much when he was gone. Neither had Bryan’s mother, who’d just used his loss as another excuse to lose herself in a bottle. Liam had thought he was the only one who’d really cared about Bryan.

He closed his arms around her and pulled her tight against his chest. “I failed him. Not you. *I* did.”

She pulled back and stared up at him. “How? You were just a kid then.”

“Just a couple years younger than he was,” he reminded her. “I could have done more. Should have done more.”

“Liam…”

“I’ve carried that guilt for twenty years,” he admitted. “As much as I blamed you, I blamed myself for not stopping him from looking for you. I blamed myself for his death.”

She shook her head. “No. You couldn’t have known the danger he was in. I should have. I’m the one who failed him. And if I were you, if it was my sister who’d been killed, I’d probably hate you.”

“I could never hate you,” he said. “Knowing now how wrong I was about you, I understand what Bryan saw in you. I see it, too, in your paintings—in the way you made love with me.” His body hardened in remembrance of exactly how she’d moved, how she’d met his every

thrust…and how she'd touched him as no one else ever had. "Hell, I even understand the vampire's obsession with you."

In his own way, Liam had been obsessed with her, too. But he'd wanted to kill her, not fall in love with her. He worried that he was doing just that, though—falling for her.

"You don't hate me," she agreed, blinking back the tears she'd wept for his brother. "But you don't trust me, either, or you wouldn't have brought the stake in here, wouldn't have stashed it next to the bed…."

"As a marine, I'm trained to always be prepared for anything." He'd also learned to trust no one. Her seduction could have been a trap, a way to lower his defenses before she attacked. He hadn't had enough control to *not* make love with her, but he'd had enough sense left to bring a weapon in case he'd needed it.

"There are some things you can't be prepared for," she said, and as she studied him through narrowed eyes, he suspected *he* was one of those things.

He hadn't been prepared for her, either. Even if she'd threatened him, he doubted he would have been able to plunge the stake in her heart. He regretted just having to push her out of the bed, so she wouldn't get caught in the middle of his battle with the vampire. He couldn't hurt her. Physically. But he'd hurt her emotionally with his mistrust of her.

"Roger will be coming back," she warned him, "and he won't come alone. He'll tell the others that you know about the society. You can't fight them all."

Just like he couldn't fight his feelings for her, no matter how much he betrayed his brother's memory by falling for the woman who was the love of Bryan's life.

"You have to leave," she said, scooping up his clothes from the floor. "You need to get as far away from Zantrax as you can."

"They can fly," he pointed out. "You think I can outrun them?"

"No. But if you're gone when they come here, I can explain. I can tell them what Roger did. I may be able to get them to make an exception for you."

"And let me live?"

"Yes."

"And if they won't?"

"You have to hide."

He shook his head. “I won’t hide. I won’t live my life that way.” There’s another way,” he reminded her, and he couldn’t believe that he’d even consider it. But since meeting her in the alley, she’d turned his world upside down. Everything he’d believed she’d proven false, so maybe this idea wasn’t that crazy. Because the only way for him to become strong enough to fight them off was to become one of them. “Turn me.”

Chapter Five

“Turn you?” Jennifer asked, incredulous that he would even consider it. She must have heard him wrong.

“Is there any other way to keep the entire society from coming after me?”

“I’ll explain about what Roger did to Bryan. They may make an exception.”

“For a man whose rage turned him into a vampire hunter? For a man who turned your sister into a vampire hunter?”

“But she didn’t kill anyone,” Jennifer reminded him. “And I don’t think you have either.”

“I doubt that’ll matter,” he replied. “You think they’ll let me live, knowing what I do? I just don’t know about their existence. I know how to *end* their existence.”

She shuddered as she conceded the logic in his thinking. There was no way the society would make an exception for him. “Maybe it won’t come to that. Maybe you really did kill Roger.”

“You don’t believe that. Not with the way he flew out of here. And even if I didn’t miss, your special surgeon probably could have saved him.”

She nodded.

“So there is no other option for me. I won’t spend my life hiding.”

“But you despise vampires,” she reminded him.

“I despise *one* vampire,” he said. “Just the one who killed my brother. He’s a monster. But you’re not. You’re not any different now than you were as a human.”

She smiled at his ignorance. “Everything’s different. I had to give up my family. My friends.”

“I have nothing to give up,” he said. Then, as if just realizing what he’d admitted, he solemnly repeated, “I have nothing.”

Touched by the vulnerability on his handsome face, Jennifer stepped closer to him. “Liam…”

“I’ve been so consumed with my quest for vengeance that I wasn’t really living. I have nothing to give up, Jennifer.” He slid his hands around her waist. “Turn me.”

“It’s not just people or things. You’re giving up your lifestyle,” she said. Wistfully she added, “Sunshine.”

“I’ve been living in darkness already,” he insisted. “I won’t miss the sun. I would miss you, though, if I had to go into hiding.”

“Me?” Was it possible that he was feeling it, too, this emotion that connected them?

“You’re the only one who knows Bryan like I did. You’re the one person I can share his memory with—the one person besides me who truly cared about him.”

She nodded. She had loved her friend. But she was afraid that she was falling in love with his brother. And Liam, as loyal as he was, probably wouldn’t let himself fall for her—not when he believed that Bryan was the one who should have been with her.

“What would he want you to do now?” Liam asked. “Wouldn’t he want you to protect me?”

“But I wouldn’t be protecting you. I might be hurting you more. I’ve never even bit a human, let alone turned one. It’s dangerous. You have to take out a specific amount of blood,” she explained. “Too little and you won’t turn. Too much and I’ll kill you.”

“I know the risks. I extensively investigated the society,” he reminded her.

“Then you know why I shouldn’t do this.”

“Do you really think anyone else would? The professor isn’t going to help me.”

“Probably not,” she said.

“So it has to be you.”

“But you don’t trust me,” she reminded him.

“I asked you to turn me,” he said with a sexy grin and a twinkle in his pale blue eyes. “Isn’t that proof that I do now?”

“I don’t trust myself….” Not with his life. He was too important to her.

“You can do this,” he assured her, and he tugged on the belt of her robe, pulling it free so that the sides parted. “We can do this together.”

He lowered his head and kissed her, as if to soothe her doubts and fears. But instead of soothing her, passion ignited at just the brief brush of his lips

across hers. He deepened the kiss, parting her lips like he had her robe. His hands slid up from her waist, over her rib cage, to cup her breasts. His thumbs teased across the nipples, so that they peaked.

She moaned at the sensations rippling through her. Now that she knew the extent of the pleasure he could give her she reacted faster to his touch. Tension pulled from her nipples to her core, the pressure building. Her body throbbed for release. She pulled her mouth from his to murmur his name as a plea. “Liam…”

His naked body hardened, his erection pushing against her belly. “I wasn’t going to do this again. But I can’t resist you.”

She needed to resist him so that she could send him off before night fell and the society came for him. But he was right; they would track him down no matter where he hid. They wouldn’t stop searching for him until they killed the vampire hunter. She was his only chance for survival.

His hands trailed from her breasts to her hips. He cupped her bottom in his palms and lifted her to the edge of the mattress. Then he knelt and parted her legs. He pressed soft kisses to the sensitive inner skin of her thighs.

She clutched her fingers in his hair, the auburn strands soft even as they glowed like burnished flames. “Liam…”

He answered her unspoken plea and kissed her intimately, sliding his tongue inside her. His hands moved up her torso and over her stomach, until he cupped her breasts again. And as his tongue stroked in and out of her, his thumbs stroked her nipples.

Jennifer arched her body, the tension nearly breaking her in two. Then he flicked his tongue over her clit, back and forth, and she came. A shudder of release left her trembling. The tremors didn’t subside until he pulled her into his arms and held her tight against his chest. His heart beat hard. And his muscles remained tense, his body unsatisfied.

She skimmed her hand down his chest to where his cock throbbed above his navel. Closing her fingers around the thickness, she stroked her palm up and down the impressive length of his shaft. “You’re so big….” So powerful for a human. But not powerful enough to fight the vampires who would come for him.

Could she turn him? Could she risk his life in order to save it?

His hand stroked down her side, over her hip, which he clutched. Then he guided her up and over his erection. She eased the tip inside her, gasping

at the sweet invasion. The tension built again despite the pleasure he'd just given her. She moved, sliding farther down, taking him deeper inside her.

He sat up, leaned forward and kissed her neck. Then his lips slid down her collarbone, over the curve of her breast to a peaked nipple. He tugged at it gently.

She cried out and spread her legs wider, taking him so deep that he was buried to the hilt inside her. Then she rocked, back and forth, meeting his thrusts. He lifted his head from her breast and kissed her lips. He slid his tongue inside her mouth and stroked it over her fangs, which grew and sharpened. And he groaned.

"Turn me," he requested, his pale eyes bright with determination and desire. "Bite me." He lay back on the bed and pulled her down with him, her face in his neck.

And so she did. She first scraped her fangs over one of the distended cords in his neck. He thrust deeper inside her, his hands clutching her back, holding her to him. Then his fingers moved into her hair, tangling the strands. "*Really* bite me…"

She nipped at him, just barely breaking the skin. He groaned, and she jerked back. "Are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

"Only because you stopped," he said, pulling her face back to his neck, where blood trickled from his small puncture wound. "Do it."

She flicked her tongue across the wound, enjoying the sweet taste of his blood. But she had to do more than taste to turn him. She had to drink. How much…?

Nerves joined the tension building inside her. Could she do it?

He reached between them, teasing her clit with his fingertip. Stroking it back and forth until every part of her throbbed. And her control snapped. She bit harder, sinking her fangs into his neck. His blood, sweet and thick, poured over her tongue. She swallowed it and continued to drink the very essence of him.

He thrust harder, and warmth filled her as he came. Sensations spiraled through her, the tension broken as intense pleasure shattered her body. She came and came, rocking against him, her face buried in his neck. Finally spent and satiated, she collapsed on top of him.

"Are you all right?" she asked, concerned that she'd drank too much. Concerned that she'd hurt him.

He nodded. “I never felt anything like that. Never felt so much…” His pale eyes drifted closed, and his breathing slowed.

He was breathing, though. He was still alive. She curled up on his chest, her head pressed to his heart so that she could monitor its beat. He was alive. But maybe just for now…

The murmur of voices drew aside the heavy curtain of sleep. Liam struggled to lift his lids, but exhaustion defeated his effort. So he kept his eyes closed and concentrated on listening. The voices weren’t whispering. It was his hearing that was strained, as if he were far away—not just in another room but in another dimension, as if he were caught between life and death.

Was he?

“He’s dead,” Jennifer’s soft feminine voice confirmed. “You had no reason to come back here and no right to break in the first time.”

“I’d heard about him. He’s a vampire hunter,” a male voice replied.

Just as he’d feared, Roger was *not* dead.

“Was,” Jennifer corrected him.

Dread clutched Liam’s heart at the conviction in her voice. He tried lifting his lids again and managed this time to pry open his eyes. The room spun and blurred before him. Now he tried lifting his body from the bed, but his muscles ached in protest of any movement.

“Too close to dawn someone saw him carrying you out of the alley behind the club,” the man continued. “You were believed to be in danger. I came to *save* you!”

“I don’t need anyone to save me anymore,” she said, as if offended. “I can protect myself.”

Was that what she was doing? He wished he knew for certain if she’d been trying to turn him or kill him. Maybe his first instincts about her had been right, and he’d let her feminine wiles sway his body and his mind.

“I want to be the one to protect you, Jennifer. I want to be there for you,” the man said. “I’ve always wanted to be there for you, but you’ve pushed me away. And then you let him in here. You take him—a *human*…a vampire *hunter*—to your bed?”

“I needed to distract him,” she claimed. “Needed to disarm him, so that I could get rid of him for good. I don’t want to be looking over my shoulder the rest of his life.”

“And now he has no life?” The vampire’s voice was hollow with doubts. “You really killed someone? You?”

“Why not?” she asked.

And even though his vision was still blurred, in his mind Liam could see her shrugging nonchalantly.

“Because you’re too sweet. Too gentle…”

Liam shuddered because he could tell, from the intimate tone of the man’s voice, that he’d stepped closer to her. That he might be touching her…

Jealousy wound through him, quickening his pulse and renewing his strength. His vision cleared, the room righting itself. And he righted himself and sat up. He had to get to her, had to protect her no matter what she said.

“But it’s the law of the society,” she said. “If a human finds out about it—about us—we have to get rid of them. And Liam McKiernan wasn’t just any human. He was the *only* human who knows how to kill us.” And now she was protecting her sister.

“He nearly killed me,” Roger admitted. “But he didn’t get the stake in deep enough—didn’t do enough damage that Doc Davison wasn’t able to fix with a couple stitches and a transfusion.”

Damn…

“He won’t be a problem anymore,” Jennifer assured him. “You can leave now.”

“No,” he insisted. “Not without seeing his body for myself…”

“You don’t believe me?” she asked, as if surprised. “You think you’re the only one who can kill for the society?”

“What do you mean?”

“It was you who killed his brother, right?” she asked. “The boy who was looking for me right after I was turned.”

“I had no choice, Jennifer,” Roger swore. “I only did it because I was protecting you.”

“I know that. I know now how you feel about me. Let’s get out of here.”

“What?”

“I’ll leave with you,” she offered. “I’ll go wherever you want me to go.”

And Liam had his answer. She was putting herself at risk for him. Mustering all his slowly returning strength, he vaulted himself out of the bed and yelled out, “No!”

He couldn’t let her sacrifice herself for him. He would rather die…and as the vampire rushed into the bedroom, he realized that he just might….

Chapter Six

"No!" Jennifer echoed Liam's shout as Roger headed toward the bedroom. She flew at his back, pounding on him. Roger had to be weak yet from the stake, but he shrugged her off as if she were inconsequential.

As if she were powerless—and she had been powerless for too much of her life. She launched herself at him, pulling at his hair and kicking and biting at his shoulders.

"Damn it!" he shouted. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You hurt me when you killed my friend," she said. "And you're going to hurt me again if you do any harm to Liam. Let him go. Just leave!"

"Don't you get it?" he asked, whirling on her, his soulless, black eyes full of a scary intensity. "I can't ever leave you. I can't ever let you go. You *belong* to me."

She shook her head. "I'm not a possession. You don't own me."

"I'm the reason you're alive," he reminded her. "I risked my own life when I told you about the society. And how do you thank me? You go to the professor. You could have got me killed."

"I didn't know," she said, defending her action. And she hadn't known then that if a vampire revealed the secret, he forfeited his immortality. She hadn't entirely believed that Roger had told the truth about being a vampire.

"You owe me your life! I'm going to take it, but first I'm going to take his." He turned back to the bedroom.

Liam stood in the doorway, weakly propped against the jamb.

She gasped in fear because he stood no chance against the obsessed vampire. She'd tried to save him by turning him, but she'd only made him more vulnerable.

"No!" she screamed again as she rushed at Roger. She caught him around the waist and dragged him away from the bedroom, back across the living room. He pulled at her arms, trying to free himself from her grasp. But she was strong. She wasn't powerless anymore.

Cursing her, he swung his elbow into her side.

Her breath rushed out in a gasp of pain, but she didn't let go. As they struggled, they fell into her paintings. Wood splintered as the frames around the canvases cracked beneath their weight.

"Get out!" Liam shouted, drawing their attention back to him. But he wasn't looking at the intruder; he was staring at her. "Get out!"

She shook her head. "No…" Had he overheard the lies she'd told in order to protect him? And, worse yet, had he believed them?

Roger laughed at her confusion and took advantage of her distraction to pull free of her grasp. "He doesn't want you around, Jennifer. He doesn't realize yet that he's the one who needs to go. But he will." He surged to his feet then into the air, flying at Liam full force.

Her heart beating with fear and dread and the love she'd only just realized for Liam, she screamed in horror as the two men connected. Liam, in his weakened state, was no match for the vampire's strength. The two bodies fell to the floor, Roger lying atop him. But neither moved.

Rage, even fiercer than the rage she'd felt when she'd come upon Liam threatening her sister in the alley, overwhelmed her. Maybe she'd somehow instinctively known that Eve hadn't been in any real danger. But now…

Red heat blurring her vision, she vaulted to her feet and flew across the length of her living room. She clawed at Roger's back, dragging him to his feet. She whirled him toward her, ready to pummel him, but his body was limp. Blood gushed from around the stake impaled in his heart.

Eternity had ended for Roger Milliken; he was dead.

"Liam!" She dropped the vampire and turned back to her lover. He lay yet on the floor, that strange gun clutched in his hands. He might not have been strong enough yet to fight Roger, but he'd been strong enough to pull the trigger. "Are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

He shook his head. "No. Is he…?"

She nodded. "Yes. I'll call the doctor."

"To resurrect him?" he asked, his light blue eyes widening with horror.

"I don't think even Dr. Davison could save him, and when he learns what Roger did, he wouldn't want to. I'm going to call him to check you out," she said, as yet again tears of relief and apprehension stung her eyes. Roger hadn't harmed him, but she was afraid that she had. "You're not well. I didn't do it right."

"I'm getting stronger," he said. And as if to prove the point, he stood up. But he staggered and leaned against the doorjamb again.

“You’re not well,” she repeated. “You need to see the doctor.” Her hand shaking, she reached for the phone. “He’ll take care of you…and Roger’s body. He’ll dispose of it.” She shuddered at the thought, at the incinerator that disposed of vampire remains so that the society’s secret was protected. She quickly placed the call, summoning the surgeon to her apartment. “He’s on the way.”

“You need to leave,” Liam said, as he had earlier, with the same amount of coldness and resolution.

And she had the answer to the question she’d asked herself earlier. He had believed the lies she’d told Roger. Liam didn’t trust that she hadn’t tried to kill him. “I need to stay and explain what happened to Dr. Davison,” she said.

“You need to go see your sister and the professor. I’m sure they’re worried about you.”

She followed his gaze to where he stared behind herat the broken portraits. The picture of Eve, lying in the hospital bed, was now ripped from corner to corner. The picture of young Liam in the tree had also been ripped, and the frame was broken. Only the solo one of Bryan remained untouched, his face grinning down at them from above the fireplace mantel.

Guilt that she could see her sister, but that he could only see Bryan like this, plagued her. “I’m sorry that you can’t be with Bryan again.” Now that he’d been turned, he’d never be able to see his brother again, not even in the afterlife.

“It’s still hurts that he’s gone,” he admitted. “But it’s better since *he’s* gone, too.” He glanced down at the dead vampire. “I did what I promised Bryan I would do. I brought his killer to justice.” Now he had no reason to stay with her.

Since she had no doubt he could explain the circumstances to Dr. Davison, she also had no reason to stay. Liam would never trust her. And if he couldn’t trust her, he would never be able to love her.

His eyes icy again, he repeated, “You need to go.”

Liam needed to go. The doctor had taken the bloodied body of the dead vampire away with him. But before he had, he’d checked out Liam and had given him a clean bill of health. Hell, his life expectancy, since Roger was dead, was now forever. As long as he abided by his list of new rules. No sunlight. Sleep during the day to recharge. Be careful of his strength, which

was so much greater than human. And always guard the secret of the society.

What about his heart? He should have guarded that, but Jennifer Williams had snuck inside it. He stared up at his brother's portrait.

"I'm sorry," he said to Bryan's picture. "I had no right to her. No right to take what should have been yours."

Bryan just kept smiling at him, as if he were happy for him. And knowing Bryan, he probably would have been. He'd been like that: generous, loving and forgiving. Liam wasn't like that, though. He'd lived too long with hate in his heart. He didn't know if he could love Jennifer like Bryan had loved her. And she deserved that. She'd been willing to give her life for his, even after the horrible way he'd treated her and her sister. Like Bryan, she was generous and loving and forgiving.

She deserved so much more than him—and his bitterness and cynicism and anger. He needed to go.

"We'll be together forever now," Eve said, hugging Jennifer tightly as the two of them stood in the living room of the professor's underground apartment. With its venetian plaster, archways and chandeliers, it was far more elegant than Jennifer's place. "We will always be a part of each other's lives"

"This is what you want?" Jennifer asked her younger sister, pulling back from their embrace to study Eve's face. Her hair was a deeper gold than Jennifer's, her eyes a richer green. She was so beautiful, so vibrant. "To be one of the society? Are you sure?"

It was too late for second thoughts, though. The professor had already turned Eve into one of them. But Jennifer needed to be certain that her sister had made her decision for the right reasons.

"I didn't do this for you," Eve assured her, as if reading her mind. Or her face. "Not like you turned for me."

"I did it for me, too," Jennifer assured her. "I didn't want to die."

A smile of pure happiness brightened Eve's already beautiful face. "And now neither of us will."

Jennifer wasn't sure about that anymore. Could a vampire die from a *broken* heart? "If you didn't change for me, why did you change?"

Eve glanced through the arched doorway leading off of the living room to the professor's den. He sat with his feet propped up on his desk, as he

leaned back in his chair, his hands crossed behind his head, his fingers tangled in his long, black hair.

"For him?" Jennifer asked.

"For love."

If only Liam had had her turn him for the same reason.

"The professor's a wonderful man," Jennifer said, giving her blessing. "You'll be happy together."

"Will you?" Eve asked, picking up on her moods as she always had even when they were kids.

"I don't know," Jennifer answered honestly. "I think he's going to be gone when I get back." She'd told Eve and Professor Vossimer everything that had happened since the alley, leaving out only a few intimate details. But she suspected they were aware of what she'd left out of her story, that they'd read it on her flushed face.

"He could have killed Roger with the gun even if he was human," Eve said. "He didn't need to turn into a vampire for his protection—not with the gun he'd made. I think he turned for you."

If only she could believe her sister, but she knew the real reason he'd become a vampire. And it had had nothing to do with Jennifer. She didn't argue with her sister, though; she just hugged her close again and then left her alone with her lover.

After flying the short distance home, she turned the key in the locked door of her apartment. Dread filled her stomach over what she would find. The body was gone; she was certain of that. But she was just as certain that Liam would be as well. Drawing in a breath, she pushed open the door and stepped into the dark foyer. Faint light glowed in the living room. Someone had lit a fire, and flames crackled in the hearth.

Chilled to the bone, she was drawn to the warmth and didn't realize she wasn't alone until strong hands closed over her shoulders. She swallowed a gasp of fear. It couldn't be Roger; he was dead. "You're still here?"

"Yes. I told you I was fine—that you could leave."

"No, I didn't think you were going to die." Or she never would have left him alone.

"I'm never going to die now, thanks to you. You turned me successfully. According to the doc, you did a great job," he assured her, squeezing her shoulders in his big hands.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

“How’d it go with your sister?” he asked. “Is she okay?”

“She’s one of the society now.”

“The professor turned her.”

“Only because she asked,” Jennifer said, defending him. “And she asked because she loved him and wanted to be with him forever.” Was it possible? Could Liam love her, too? Dare she hope that was why he’d stayed?

“I’m happy for them,” he said, with sincerity. “And sorry for everything I did to them.”

“Without you, they would never have found each other,” she said. “Without you, she never would have found me. I owe you.”

He expelled that little, bitter chuckle again. “You’re too forgiving.”

And he wasn’t. “I was lying to Roger—in case you heard what I told him….” She had to explain, even if he wouldn’t accept the truth.

“I know.”

She turned toward him and stared up into his handsome face. The color had returned to his complexion, making his pale eyes sparkle even brighter. Or could it be emotion that caused that glitter? “You knew I was lying?”

“You wouldn’t have tried to kill me,” he said with conviction. “You love me.”

“What?”

“I see it in your face,” he said, as he cupped her cheek in his palm. “And in this painting you started.”

He’d taken the canvas from the easel she’d been working at when Roger had broken into her apartment again. The easel had survived their struggle. In his portrait, Liam slept, and his skin was burnished with light and warmth: each brush stroke as intimate as she had touched him when they’d made love.

“It’s not done yet.” She hadn’t had time to define his features; they were in soft focus—the whole picture was a little blurred. “I need to do more work.”

“You have time,” he assured her. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re not?” she asked, surprise and relief filling her. “Why not?”

“Because I love you. I didn’t want to. I thought I was betraying my brother, but then I realized that instead of making Bryan jealous or angry, that our being together—that our being happy—would make him happy.”

“Is that the only reason you’re saying this?” She had to know. “Because of Bryan?”

“It’s not because of Bryan. It’s despite him. He’s the reason I thought I could never be with you. But he’s gone. I have finally accepted that. I’m finally ready to move on, but I can’t do that—I don’t want to do that—without you, Jennifer. I love you.”

The doubts and fears left, leaving only love in her heart as she accepted his word. “You love me….”

“It’s okay if you don’t believe me yet because I have eternity to prove to you how much I love you.” He swung her up in his arms and headed toward the bedroom. “Starting right now…”

She would never tire of his carrying her. In the bedroom, he set her on her feet, sliding her slowly down the length of his hard, muscled body. She explored those muscles, pulling up his shirt and dragging it over his head. Then she skimmed her nails down his chest, over his rippling washboard abs, to the button at the waist of his pants. Her fingers trembled but she pulled the button free. She pushed down the dark pants, along with his boxers, until he stood naked before her. And her breath hissed out between her teeth. He was so damn beautiful. She couldn’t wait to finish that painting, but she wouldn’t need it. She’d have him here with her—always.

He was equally as busy pulling off her sweater and pushing down her pants. When she stood naked before him, even the bits of lace discarded, he groaned. His eyes bright with passion, he murmured, “I love you….”

He lifted her again, carrying her the last few feet to the bed. Jennifer flopped onto the mattress, locked her arms around his neck and pulled him down on top of her. “Prove it,” she teased. “Love me.”

He kissed her deeply, their fangs scraping against each other while their tongues mated. He pulled back, his eyes wide at the new sensation.

She smiled at his reaction and invited him to “Bite me….”

He shook his head, as reluctant as she’d been to give in to the new craving.

“It won’t hurt me,” she promised. “And it’ll join us completely. I’ve taken a part of you inside of me. Now you can have a part of me flowing through your veins as well.”

He groaned, but then he slid his mouth across her cheek to the hollow below her ear. He licked, like she’d licked him the night before, tasting her.

But he didn’t stop at her neck, he slid his tongue down over her collarbone and a tip of a breast, teasing the nipple.

She shifted beneath him, parted her legs and arched her hips. Her heart pounded hard with passion as she rubbed against his straining erection.

He replaced his tongue with a fang, lightly scraping it over her nipple. And she cried out at the exquisite torture.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked.

She nodded. “I hurt. I ache for you….” The tension had wound so tight inside her…it was unbearable. She needed the release only he could give her. Lifting her legs, she locked them around his lean waist.

He reached between their bodies and slid a finger inside her. He closed his pale eyes and groaned. “You’re so hot…so ready….” So he thrust inside her, burying himself deep.

Jennifer lifted her hips, meeting each of his thrusts, pulling him deeper inside her. She ran her nails down his back, clutching him close.

He held her tight, his face buried in her neck. She felt the heat of his breath; it raised goose bumps along her skin. Then his fangs scraped over those fine bumps. He closed his mouth around her, the points of his fangs sinking into her flesh. He suckled, drinking the blood he’d spilled.

The pressure inside her broke free, and she shuddered at the force of the orgasm slamming through her. In her arms, his body tensed, and he came, spilling inside her even as her blood filled him.

He pulled back and licked his lips. His breathing labored, he only gasped in surprise. “That was…”

More than making love. They had become one—two souls united for eternity.

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ISBN: 978-1-4268-6669-2

The Vampire Hunter

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